

GOING TO EXTREMES

Dan Avila ventures to Svalbard, a remote yet fascinating archipelago in the High Arctic, to experience a vast wilderness of aquamarine glaciers, frozen tundras and polar bears.

I'm on a snowmobile cruising at about 80 kilometres per hour over sea ice. The cold is taking a savage toll on the exposed parts of my face, but I'm more worried about losing sight of my fast-moving companions than maintaining any semblance of comfort.

Without warning, our guide Erlend Bratlie veers his machine into a hard-left arc, quickly skidding to a halt. He stands and points, and then I see them: my first polar bears, set against the dramatic, slow-setting Arctic sun and confidently making their way toward us.

We stand in awe as the hulking creatures lope in our direction, their thick white fur flapping in the breeze, until Erlend decides they are getting too close for comfort and gives the command for us to beat a hasty retreat.

Welcome to Svalbard, a wild, unforgiving and utterly spellbinding archipelago in the High Arctic where almost everything is a matter of extremes: extreme weather, wildlife and people. It's a place where the Northern Lights are clearly visible during winter, and summer brings the "midnight sun" – sunlight 24 hours a day.

A cluster of Norwegian islands located between mainland Norway and the North Pole, Svalbard is becoming a magnet for intrepid travellers in search of expedition-style journeys infused with the Arctic's inherent spirit of adventure and discovery.

Leading the way is Hurtigruten, an experienced expedition cruise company with a long Norwegian heritage that is making a concerted foray into quality land-based tours, upscale lodgings and unique excursions in and around coastal Longyearbyen.

Operating with rigorous safety procedures, cutting-edge environmental sustainability and premium-quality services, Hurtigruten aims to offer an outstanding Svalbard experience, complete with polar bears, reindeer and dog sleds.

A true Arctic frontier

Not too long ago, this remote and frigid outpost was the province of hunters and coal miners: in essence, the toughest of the tough. Today, it draws researchers and explorers from around the world. "That's the funny thing about Svalbard,"

“Beneath the surface are hidden jewels of glacial caves; just getting there by dog sled is a major thrill.”



01 Polar bears by the Svea ice wall 02 Snowmobiles are used to explore the countryside 03 Hauntingly beautiful caves in the glacial permafrost 04 A Greenland-cross working dog resting in the snow 05 Dog sledding 06 Long Arctic sunsets turn the landscape pink. All images © Dan Avila and Zora Avila



Scan the code to see more beautiful imagery from Dan and Zora's trip into the Arctic, or visit signatureluxurytravel.com.au/hurtigruten-svalbard

their cars or houses here,” says our guide Maria. “In case a bear comes through town, you can take refuge in any house or car.” While it’s rare for bears to wander into Longyearbyen, it’s a different story in Svea, a mining town on the southern side of Spitsbergen Island.

The Svea Ice Wall is close enough to reach before last light, so we go for it, stopping a safe distance from the decidedly menacing aquamarine ice face. I’m completely fascinated by the depth of colour and texture of glacier walls – it’s a photographer’s nirvana – and this one is no exception.

Stealing the final shot as the visual warmth of sunset surrenders to the blue light of evening, the temperature drops, and Svea, with its promise of a warm meal, beckons – but our initial polar bear sighting isn’t a one-off occurrence. “Did you hear the banging on your door last night?” asks Erlend. “That was security coming to make sure you stayed indoors; the bears wandered through town twice last night.”

The thrill of it all

The intense natural beauty of Svalbard isn’t just skin deep. Beneath the surface there are hidden jewels of glacial caves that must be seen to be believed; just getting there by dog sled is a major thrill.

“There are two rules for dog sledding,” says our guide, with just a hint of Arctic understatement. “Number one: don’t let go. Number two: don’t let go.”

Our motley crew of huskies, malamutes and Greenland dogs howl in anticipation of a trail run. Snowmobiles are as fun as they are essential to modern life in the Arctic, but there is a primal beauty to traversing this immense, frigid wilderness behind a pack of working dogs.

A small tent marks an otherwise innocuous depression on a snow-covered glacier. Leaving our dogs to rest, we squeeze unceremoniously, backwards into the deep snow-covered orifice. The snow gives way to walls of deep, dark ice, natural sculptures of crystal formations and a series of large caverns. Helmet-mounted headlamps provide the only light source in this Narnian wonderland that is as awe-inspiring as any medieval cathedral.

Every day in Svalbard is a unique experience. The light changes in seconds, as does the weather, and everyone I meet has their own special story of excitement and extremes.

“Things change a lot in a couple of generations,” says one of my companions and Hurtigruten’s global public relations manager, Øystein Knoph. “Today we revere these polar bears, but the people here once hunted them. It must have been a strange sight to see my grandfather walking into Longyearbyen with two orphaned baby polar bear cubs by his side.”

Taking my final sunset shots from the comfort and warmth of my suite at Longyearbyen’s Funken Lodge, I think of the tales of survival of the early explorers who built shelters of timber covered in skins, and who wrote, in their final months of survival, of burning their feet against the fire while their backs froze in the unearthly temperatures of the Arctic winter.

My salubrious surroundings notwithstanding, it is this rawness and unforgiving honesty that is the true source of Svalbard’s rapidly growing appeal. ♦

Travel file

Experience
hurtigrutensvalbard.com/en

Getting there
Scandinavian Airlines flies daily from Oslo, the Norwegian capital, to Longyearbyen in Svalbard, via Tromsø. Flights are frequently cancelled or redirected due to wild weather, ice and snow. Buffer time for visits to the islands is recommended, so allow for a day or two either side of planned travel dates. Activities are also highly weather dependent with avalanche risk always assessed after heavy snowfalls to determine accessible areas. flysas.com

Where to stay
The Coal Miners’ Cabins are converted mine-workers’ accommodation with large rooms and shared bathrooms. The bar and restaurant has a lively social vibe. Radisson Blu is central to town with quality restaurants. Funken Lodge is a beautifully refurbished luxury hotel with commanding views of the town and fjord. hurtigrutensvalbard.com

Insider advice

- Svalbard is in the High Arctic, which means conditions can vary from 24 hours of darkness to 24 hours of daylight. Each season affords unique and fascinating experiences and opportunities for those who bring an expedition mindset.
- Pack for the extreme conditions. This means thermals, layers, parkas (rated for at least -15°C), beanie, gloves, waterproof and windproof hiking pants, and hiking boots.